



Leadership & Rhetoric: Why Words Matter

Last month, the son of one of our valued colleagues felt forced to give up a sport he loved after finding himself the senseless victim of repeated intolerant locker room comments. Although I'm well aware that the root cause of bullying varies by individual, I was nevertheless disheartened to have heard this story around the same time as the highly-scrutinized response to the Charlottesville protest.

While I admit it's easy to remain naive to the repercussions of words when you yourself aren't directly affected, the more personal stories I hear similar to that of our colleague, the more obvious it becomes to me that words matter—and they matter a lot. Whether it's a speech, an interview, a conversation, or a 140-character Tweet, the language of a leader has the power to instill hope or fear in those listening, as well as impact everything from entire nations and organizations, to individual lives. As a daily reminder, here are three powerful reasons why your words matter:

Words EDUCATE.

Words are a primary tool used to share not only facts, but also one's vision, values, and intentions. And while a leader's words certainly educate others on what he or she personally thinks or feels about a particular topic, it also sets the tone for what is acceptable—or even expected—for others to think and feel as well. That's why it can be extremely dangerous when leaders refuse to take a bold stance against hateful behavior or, in other cases, opt to abuse their authority by “educating” others with misinformation.

Words PERSUADE.

By definition, a leader influences a group of people toward the achievement of a goal. That's why the most effective leaders are not only able to articulate their goals, but to do so in a way that persuades others to join their cause. Unfortunately, whereas responsible leaders move people to action by instilling a sense of confidence and hope, irresponsible leaders tend to use uncertainty and fear as tools to motivate their followers to act.

Words AMPLIFY.

It's often said that you can't take your words back, but in today's tech savvy culture, the problem extends much deeper. Between our 24-hour news cycle, and the power of

social media, the words of leaders—both good and bad—are often recorded, published, and thoroughly analyzed. That’s why leaders today must not only be thoughtful about their word choices, but also deliver honest messages that they can confidently justify and factually support.

So what does this all mean?

All words matter, but the words of leaders carry additional weight and responsibility. Especially in challenging times, a leader’s words are relied upon for guidance. If their words are notably absent when needed, leaders can create false assumptions. If their words are unclear or inconsistent, leaders can cause confusion. And worst of all, if their words are clear but lacking moral grounding, leaders have the alarming ability to corrupt the hearts and minds of others.

Mother Teresa once said, “If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.” Similarly, if you aren’t happy with the words in recent headlines, we challenge you to make a difference by going back to your own organization and leading with words that set a positive example for your colleagues, families, and communities.

Are your words—and the words of other leaders within your company—a consistent, positive, and accurate representation of your organization and its values? At RRG, we develop our clients’ leaders to communicate more clearly and confidently through a variety of services tailored to their unique needs. To learn more, give us a call today at 708.738.5040, or visit our website at RRGExec.com